
OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET ANALYST REPORT

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Residents' Opinions on City Services

OVERVIEW

At the Budget and Finance Committee meeting of January 27, 2010, the IBA presented "Status of the Citizen Survey" (IBA Report [10-5](#)). The Citizen Survey aims to gauge citizen opinions on the priority of and satisfaction with services being provided by the city and willingness to pay more to maintain city service levels. A draft of the survey was included for committee members to review. During the meeting, each survey question was presented and members had an opportunity to provide their feedback and suggestions.

Subsequent to the Budget and Finance Committee meeting, the IBA also reviewed the draft survey with the Citizen's Revenue Review and Economic Competitiveness Commission (CRRECC) at their meeting on January 28, 2010.

After compiling the comments from both meetings, the IBA consulted with Behavior Research Center, Inc. (BRC), the firm that prepared and will be administering the survey, regarding suggested revisions. After considering all of the feedback, we developed a final version which is attached. Following the Budget and Finance Committee meeting, we plan to submit the final survey to BRC and the survey process will be initiated.

This report provides a summary of the major survey changes suggested by the Committee and CRRECC, as well as general issues that were discussed. This report concludes with a timeline of when the survey will be administered and when results are expected to be available.

FISCAL/POLICY DISCUSSION

Major Suggested Changes to Survey Questions

Below is a summary of major changes suggested during the Committee and CRRECC meetings, and an explanation as to their current status.

The Value of Questions One and Two

A purpose of the survey is to gauge residents' opinions on specific city services. There was discussion on whether the first two questions that inquire about general views of the city as a whole were too broad and may not add value. These questions are:

1. "Would you say you strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with the following statements, 'Overall, San Diego is a good place to live.'"
2. "On the whole, would you say that the quality of life in the City of San Diego is excellent, good, fair or poor?"

Both of these questions were included in the surveys undertaken by the City prior to 2005 (the point at which the surveys were stopped). Including these questions will provide valuable trending information from pre-2005 to 2010.

Framing of Question Four

In the draft of the citizen survey, Question Four was an open-ended question which read, "What do you think is the most serious issue facing the residents of San Diego that you would like to see City government do something about?" It was suggested that this question may need more framing so as to focus responses on City services. Therefore, the question now reads (italics added), "what do you think is the most serious problem facing the residents of San Diego, *with respect to services provided by the City*, that you would like to see City government do something about?"

"Mandated" versus "Discretionary" Services in Question Five

Question Five asks residents to rate how essential they believe various city services are. The list of services provided on the survey includes services that the City is required to provide under the Charter and also discretionary services or "extras." An issue arose as to whether the "mandatory" and "discretionary" services should be separated into two groups and be measured independently. Various Commission and Committee members expressed concern that if the City is required under the Charter to provide certain services to the community, such as public safety services, what can the City do if residents deemed a required service "non-essential?" However, BRC advised not to separate any of the city services but to keep them on one list, which is what the final version of the survey reflects. Understanding that the City must provide certain services, BRC noted that the best way to obtain an accurate assessment of all services listed on the survey is to group them together so they can be evaluated relative to one another.

Another suggested change to Question Five, which has been incorporated, includes adding “emergency medical services” to the list of services. Also as suggested, the rating scale has been changed from “one to ten” to “one to four.”

Changes to Strategies Listed in Question Ten

Question Ten provides the respondent with various strategies for addressing the city’s structural budget deficit. They are asked to indicate how much they approve of each strategy listed. In the original survey, the first strategy was “generating new revenue through increase taxes and fees.” However, it was suggested to separate “taxes” and “fees” as they may be perceived differently by residents and their support between the two may vary. In the revised draft, one option is (italics added) “generate new revenue through increased *fees* to help avoid service reductions” and another is “generate new revenue through increased *taxes* to help avoid service reductions.”

Also as suggested, we have added two additional strategy options. One includes, “Further reductions to City employee salaries and benefits.” The second is open-ended and asks for “other ideas.” This gives an opportunity for citizens to provide their own ideas for consideration.

Major Issues Surrounding the Implementation of a Citizen Survey

Representation of the Younger Demographic

An issue raised at both the Committee and CRRECC meetings was whether opinions of residents in younger demographics would be properly represented in survey results. Based on the current agreement and survey budget, only residents with landlines will be contacted as survey costs increase when cell phones are included in the sample. This raised concern that many younger residents may not have landlines and therefore, could be underrepresented in the results. In our discussions with BRC, they indicated the survey data collected can be statistically weighted to account for any differences in demographics related to this matter.

The Importance of Implementing and Continuing Citizen Surveys

A Citizen Survey can be a valuable tool for informing the City Council and the Mayor as well as the public, on the needs, priorities and opinions of the citizens. Results can assist City leaders in framing policy choices and making difficult decisions, which can be especially helpful in the current fiscal environment. Furthermore, the survey and its results can serve as a baseline for comparing residents’ opinions on City services in the future. This can provide valuable information on changes in service priorities as well as satisfaction levels among various City services.

CONCLUSION

Once the survey is finalized, data collection and completion of reports summarizing the results are expected to take no longer than 6 weeks. Once completed, the IBA will present the results to the Budget and Finance Committee, the Citizens Revenue Review and Economic Competitiveness Commission, and the City Council in late April 2009.

[SIGNED]

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Attachment: City of San Diego-Community Attitude Survey-Residents' Opinions of City Services